

---

This is the **published version** of the bachelor thesis:

Duarte Montávez, Tania; Coral, Jordi, dir. Demonizing and silencing powerful women : the absent witch in Shakespeare's 'The tempest'. 2015. 26 pag. (801 Grau en Estudis Anglesos)

---

This version is available at <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/141248>

under the terms of the  license

**Demonizing and Silencing Powerful Women:  
The Absent Witch in Shakespeare's *The Tempest***

TFG Estudis Anglesos

Supervisor: Dr Jordi Coral

Tania Duarte

June 2015



# Table of Contents

Abstract .....	3
Introduction .....	4
Women in Elizabethan Theatre .....	5
Witchcraft in the Modern Ages .....	8
<i>The Tempest's</i> Sycorax: Postcolonial Reading, Witchcraft and the Issues of Gender and	
Motherhood .....	11
Conclusion .....	22
Bibliography .....	24

## **Abstract**

Although the Renaissance period is thought to be one of revival and cultural rebirth, the figure of the witch was more present than ever. Unsurprisingly, women who were independent and challenged the rules of patriarchal thought were very often accused of witchcraft. Sycorax, the famous silent witch from William Shakespeare's late romance *The Tempest*, is the perfect example of a powerful woman whose voice was silenced by the patriarchy. In my paper, I intend to argue how Prospero, a male wizard, built a twisted representation of Sycorax in order to highlight his own benevolence, but how ultimately his powerful creation became a threat to his own system.

## Introduction

Nowadays, witchcraft seems to be a topic restricted to fiction and the very vivid imagination of children. Our knowledge is so extensive that the typical image of a witch flying around on her broomstick, casting spells on innocent people, sounds ridiculous and far from scary or threatening. However, that has not always been the case. The Renaissance is usually presented as a cultural rebirth, a period during which significant advantages in science-based fields were being made, but, ironically, it was also the period that introduced a new-found belief (and fear) in the supernatural into the European scene. Just like any other important event in history, it has been immortalized by many authors, playwrights and poets in their works, including William Shakespeare. Witchcraft is, undoubtedly, a recurring topic in several of his plays, always serving a clear purpose. Among his many works with references to the supernatural, there is *The Tempest*, thought to be the last play he wrote on his own and which deals with the legacy of an island previously ruled by the unseen witch Sycorax. One of the most interesting traits about *The Tempest*, and Sycorax in particular, is how it explores the idea that empowered, fearless women (and their legacy - in this case, her child and the memory of her) can become such a threat to male characters that they are demonized and ridiculed; an idea that is present even in his earliest works.

## Women in Elizabethan Theatre

Whether we choose to refer to it as early modern English theatre, Renaissance theatre or Elizabethan theatre, the truth is that all three terms refer to the exact same events: the theatre produced in England between 1562 and 1642. In French, the term "renaissance" means to be born again, a rebirth or revival, and that is exactly what the Renaissance period was characterized by: it was an age of expansion and prosperity in many different fields, including theatre, which was the most popular form of entertainment at the time. Some of the most memorable characteristics of Elizabethan theatre include the construction of both public and private theatres in a circular shape and with a bare stage, that is, with barely any props, which required the playwright to incorporate references to the place, time of the day, weather and the entrance or exit of any of the other characters to be expressed verbally by the actors in order for the audience to have a better understanding of the play (which can be seen in most of Shakespeare's plays, such as *Hamlet* or the historical play *Richard III*). The major themes explored through the plays produced during the Renaissance period can also be analyzed through Shakespeare, who is still considered the most important playwright of the time, along with Christopher Marlow, John Fletcher and Thomas Kyd, among others; and whose great contribution to the Elizabethan theatre consists of thirty-seven plays. For instance, there is the issue of morality and the duality between good and evil (*Measure for Measure*), racial, religious and political conflict (*Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, various historical plays), family-related conflict (*Measure for Measure*, *Romeo and Juliet*), treachery (*Hamlet*, *Othello*) and an interest on the supernatural (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*, *The Tempest*). For the most part, Shakespeare's plays reflect the issues of

the time, including the always controversial topics of religion, politics and morality, which are still as relevant and interesting nowadays.

Even though the Elizabethan period is usually associated with renewal and advances, the truth is that it was still a very patriarchal society. Women have always struggled to find a place in society -or in their own families- where their roles were not restricted to being somebody's wife, daughter and mother, and their role during the Renaissance era was still very limited. Generally, women were thought to be unable to look after themselves, so they either depended on their husbands, fathers or any other male relatives – a shocking concept considering that an unmarried woman was on the throne in England at the time. As in many other periods throughout history, men were supposed to be the ones providing for their families while women stayed at home taking care of the children, but they were still allowed to take up jobs as maids or cooks. However, they were not allowed to pursue the same professions as men and they could not go to school or university either, even though some educated women were tutored at home. While they were allowed to write, as long as the topic was "appropriate" (i. e. Religion, mainly), they were not allowed to do it for the public, which means there was not a place for women on stage either.

No matter the situation on stage, playwrights never ceased to include women in their plays -usually played by young boys- and Shakespeare created some of the most unforgettable female characters from the time. The importance of those characters relies not only on the fact that they were invented by who is thought of as the best playwrights to ever exist, but also on unconventionality. Many of Shakespeare's female characters were not considered traditional. Of course, some of them stuck to the idea of the pure, obedient woman, such as Miranda from *The Tempest*, but there were many others that defied the

rules. However, if we take a closer look at some of Shakespeare's plays, we will find that even though female characters are very relevant and often play big roles, there is a noticeable difference depending on the genre of the play. For instance, as observed in the preface of Penny Gay's "As She Likes It: Shakespeare's Unruly Women", "the comedies, which (with few exceptions) center on female characters, and give them a great deal more to say than do either the tragedies or the histories (the Cleopatra play always excepted)." (Gay, 1994: 10) While no one can deny the significance of Shakespeare's comedies or devalue their worth as a whole, very often they are not given as much importance as those dealing with more significant matters, such as politics, religion or any other social issue – at least that was the case until the feminist theory became more popular in the 1970s, according to Gay. Thus, women are given more prominent roles in Shakespeare's comedies, but if we discard comedies as insignificant and choose to focus only on his tragedies and histories, we will only have plays in which women are either presented as somehow secondary or simply ridiculed and demonized, as we will see later on with *The Tempest*.



## **Witchcraft in the Modern Ages**

In order to have a better understanding of the events taking place in the plays I will be focusing on in regards to women, it is important that we aim our attention at the history of witchcraft in Europe from the thirteenth century onwards, but particularly in the early Modern Ages. While witchcraft is rarely taken seriously in the Western world nowadays, the practice of witch hunting ended the lives of approximately one million Europeans from the thirteenth to the nineteenth century, according to data extracted from Emily Oster's "Witchcraft, Weather and Economic Growth in Renaissance Europe". To think that witchcraft is an invention born in the Middles Ages, though, would be a mistake. The fear of the witch -and, therefore, the belief in such creatures- can be traced back to the Greek and Roman cultures in the Pre-Christian era. However, even though it is impossible to know where the figure of the sorceress comes from, it is true that witch hunting is mainly associated with the Christian church. In fact, the earliest witch trials are very often attributed to them. As Oster explains, "The first trials for witchcraft emerged from the actions of the Catholic Inquisition, an official church-sponsored investigatory organization designed to stamp out heretical behavior. [...] During this period, witchcraft accusations were often closer to heresy -accusations of prostration to the devil, for example- than to criminal behavior." (Oster, 2004: 217) It is true, however, that the Inquisition per se did not actually operate in England, but the procedure was fairly similar.

The direct involvement of the church appears to be significantly lower later on, which leaves a big black hole of unanswered questions when it comes to the reasons why such trials were being carried out. The testimonies that have been recovered over the centuries allow us to have an idea of what caused accusations at a smaller scale, that is, at a

village level. These accusations were usually the result of local feuding or family conflicts over children or property, but the reason why one million people were executed in the name of witchcraft still remains uncertain. As seen in Jonathan Barry's *Keith Thomas and the Problem of Witchcraft*, Keith Thomas himself, author of *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971), aimed to study the impact of supernatural beliefs at a larger scale, as well as finding a "*psychological* explanation of the motives of the participants in the drama of witchcraft accusation, a *sociological* analysis of the situation in which such accusations tended to occur, and an *intellectual* explanation of the concepts which made such accusations plausible." (Barry, 1996: 559) Ultimately, he sought to find a logical explanation as to why the people he considered "intelligent" believed in witchcraft and why it became such a huge phenomenon.

Most importantly and directly related to the topic of my paper, there is the fact that most people that were accused of witchcraft and executed were women. In fact, the figure of the witch is still associated with women, as seen in Oster's article: "[...] belief in the witch, and the fear of *her*, is enduring". (Oster, 2004: 215) Although men were also accused of practicing witchcraft occasionally, the vast majority of victims were women, most of them widows or poor old ladies – that is, women that did not have a man looking after them, as it was expected. These so-called witches would be outspoken, fearless and very often more sexually active than it was socially accepted, which seemed to be a threat to their patriarchal society. Witches were outcasts who were not integrated in society and very often lived near the forest, which leads us to another factor that may have been the cause for mass trials: the fear that these women were able to control the forces of nature. Back in 1484, Pope Innocent VIII claimed that witchcraft was to blame for the destruction of their

crops, which had been destroyed due to the unusually cold weather during the period called Little Ice Age, hence implying that witches were actually able to control the forces of nature. According to Oster's study, there is data that proves that there was a strong correlation between the weather and the state of the crops and the amount of executions being carried out at the time.

## ***The Tempest's* Sycorax: Postcolonial Reading, Witchcraft and the Issues of Gender and Motherhood**

So far we have discussed the unbalanced situation of women in the Elizabethan Era in relation to their male counterparts and how said oppression and the values of a highly patriarchal society led some of them to be demonized and executed in the name of witchcraft. If there is a female character that encapsulates both aspects and so much more, it is Sycorax from Shakespeare's late romance *The Tempest*. William Shakespeare's absent witch does not appear on stage even once, as she dies long before the actions of the play begin, yet we know more about her than we do about other characters in the play –although the information we receive may not be completely reliable–. She may not be on stage, but her name is mentioned as many as seven times throughout the play and she is constantly remembered and talked about by the main characters.

Over the years, the character of Sycorax has been studied from many points of view, the most popular ones being feminism and postcolonialism, and one of the first aspects to catch the reader's attention is her name. Shakespeare was known to give his characters names with either a mythological or historical precedent, or an invented name that would express important traits about the character. While it is impossible to know Shakespeare's reasoning behind his choice, many scholars have speculated about the origin of the name "Sycorax", coming up with some very interesting and probably accurate ideas, out of which I am going to focus on two. Firstly, it has been suggested that its origins may be on the Greek words "sys" and "corax", which meant sow and raven, respectively, and which are both often associated with witchcraft. Secondly, there is the possibility that it comes from

Corax of Syracuse, one of the founders of ancient Greek rhetoric, which is very present in *The Tempest*. In order to back these theories up, it is important to remember what we know about Shakespeare's education: he attended grammar school, which very often included lessons on classical authors and occasionally the study of Greek, therefore he may have been aware of said connotations. Thus, being associated with persuasion and dark arts, Sycorax does not need to be on stage to incite fear for her name alone is a curse.

Sycorax is commonly referred to as the absent witch, and rightly so, but she is still more present than most characters in *The Tempest*. However, it is very difficult for the reader to have a clear idea of her backstory and herself in general, for Sycorax is constructed solely on what other characters think of her – especially the play's other wizard, Prospero. From the very first time he mentions "the foul witch Sycorax" (1.2.257), we can see that his words cannot be trusted, as cannot be those said by Ariel, who is under Prospero's control. Prospero's image of Sycorax comes from a place of hatred, fear and jealousy towards the witch and her powers. The legacy of her magic is so influential that he seems to have the urge to deconstruct the real memory of her to build a new Sycorax, which is possible because of her absence. His descriptions and memories are manipulated and she is not there to prove him wrong. In that sense, we could argue that there are traits of Postcolonial discourse in *The Tempest* and we could relate the construction of Sycorax to the construction of the Other on the part of the Empire. Prospero, a white male, thinks himself superior not only to Sycorax, a presumably dark-skinned woman from Algiers, but also to her son Caliban. Just like the East during colonialism, she is pictured as barbaric and a savage. As seen in Abena P. A. Busia's "Silencing Sycorax: On African Colonial Discourse and the Unvoiced Female", "one of the primary characteristics in the

representation of the African woman is the *construction* of her inactive silence.” (Busia, 1989: 86) By being silent, she cannot fight against her own dehumanization.

When placing the character in a postcolonial context, the concept of the “double bind” must be taken into account. In the words of Gabriella Tóth, “in colonial literature, Sycorax is the representation of female subjectivity that is the most problematic of all, and this stems from the fact that post-colonial women are subjected to a ‘double bind’, that is, they experience two forms of alienation and/or ‘othering’: gender and racial.” (Tóth, 2013: 133) In colonialism, minorities will always be the losing party. Simultaneously, womanhood is often seen as weak and inferior, so it is not only a racial issue, but also a matter of gender. However, *The Tempest* takes it one step further. In addition to being an African woman who has both been banished from Algiers (while the reasons remain uncertain, some critics believe her to have been forced into exile due to her powers interfering with Algerian authorities, perhaps regarding religion as she worshipped the god Setebos during a time when Islam was the official religion in Algiers) and whose island has been colonized by white power, she is also a witch, a historically marginalized subject. Witches would be excluded from society, both socially and physically as they either lived near the forest or were forced into exile. Therefore, a triple bind could be applicable to Sycorax: she is alienated and undermined due to her race, gender and magical abilities.

Having explored the issue of race in *The Tempest*, the next step would be witchcraft. As most of Sycorax’s background, it is unclear why or how she received her powers and what she was really capable of. If what we know about her through other characters’ speeches is anything to go by, though, she was both a powerful and dangerous witch who was banished from her country and taken to the island because of her magic. However,

when the audience cannot actually meet someone first-hand, what they are left is just mere speculation that is filtered by every other character's opinions, feelings and experiences. In *The Tempest*, as previously mentioned, Sycorax is mainly mentioned by her son Caliban, Prospero and his slave Ariel –formerly hers–, none of which can be objective. Although they all seem to agree that she was powerful, their opinions are undoubtedly influenced by internal factors. Caliban's most important lines about his mother are regarding his claim to the island; however, the issues of motherhood, childbirth and legacy will be commented on separately. The rest of the information the audience has about Sycorax comes through Ariel, in one way or another, because she died long before Prospero could meet her. Ariel seems to be quite scared of her, which reinforces the idea that the audience has about her strength and powers. In fact, given Ariel's feelings towards the witch, it would actually make sense if Sycorax had enslaved all spirits when she arrived to the island, as Prospero mentions. Anyhow, there is no record of any more human beings living on the island before she arrived, so it probably belonged to the spirits. Therefore, there is a possibility that Ariel is just bitter about having been, in a way, invaded.

When it comes to Prospero himself, the information he has been receiving for years has all come from Ariel, so what is shown to the audience is something that has been influenced by two different people. Prospero agrees that “His mother was a witch, and one so strong / That could control the moon, make flows and ebbs, / And dealing her command without her power.” (5.1.270 – 273) At first sight and in isolation from the rest of the play, it sounds as if Prospero were praising her abilities. However, upon further research, it is very clear that he is doing exactly the opposite. Instead, his words are full of hatred and resentment towards someone he has never laid eyes on, someone who never did anything to

harm or enrage him. One could argue that such malice comes from a place of disapproval and detestation of witches. It would be possible given the context in which the play was written and the situation of witchcraft at the time, but there is something that does not add up: Prospero is a supernatural being, too. He is usually referred to as a magician – the definition being simply “a person with magical powers”, according to the Oxford Dictionary. In any case, a new problem arises with the identification of Sycorax as a witch and the implications of said term. Although the word “witch” comes from the Old English words “wicca” and “wicce” (for men and women, respectively), originally meaning sorcerer, sorceress, wizard and generally somebody who practiced witchcraft; later on the meaning took on a more depictive meaning. More specifically, according to the Online Etymology Dictionary, a witch was thought to be “a woman supposed to have dealings with the devil or evil spirits and to be able by their cooperation to perform supernatural acts” which relates to what Suzanne Penuel mentions in *Male Mothering and The Tempest*, “the magician was not, unlike witches, thought to have had intercourse with the devil.” (Penuel, 2007: 120). In fact, Prospero uses the same argument when he tells Caliban that he was “got by the devil himself” (1.2.319 – 320), implying that Sycorax did, indeed, have intercourse with an evil spirit. Therefore, “witch” becomes a gendered insult that does not actually disrespect her abilities but her womanhood.

Considering what we know about magic, we are now aware –as is Prospero– that wizards are usually associated with white magic, while it is safe to say that historically the word “witch” has never been used in a positive sense. Prospero identifies himself as a wizard and talks about his powers in terms of benevolent magic, in contrast to the image of Sycorax that he presents to the audience. While reading *The Tempest*, one must remember



that the play was both created and written during the Elizabethan era, that is, in a highly patriarchal context. Men were considered to be leaders and breadwinners, but women were practically powerless. Bearing that in mind, the idea of a powerful woman (even if she was fictional) was hard to conceive. As mentioned in Phyllis Rackin's "Patriarchal History and Female Subversion" from his own book *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles*, "excluded from Shakespeare's stage and denied by the logic of patriarchal discourse, incomprehensible within the categories of patriarchal thought, the inconceivable reality of female authority and the intolerable fact of female power could be rationalized only in terms of the supernatural." (Rackin, 1990: 194) Therefore, women who were powerful and defied patriarchal thought were considered witches, which can be seen very clearly in the history of witch-hunting in England and the rest of Europe, as previously mentioned. Since we are already dealing with a play that includes supernatural elements, though, that is to be expected. However, Sycorax's power is not only rationalized in terms of the supernatural, but also in terms of black magic. If there is something most characters agree on is that Sycorax was powerful (although whether she was stronger than Prospero or not will remain unknown), but her magic and overall strength and powers are justified as being black witchcraft, which is supposed to be feared and condemned, not admired or respected – at least not by Prospero.

It has been established that Prospero's hatred towards Sycorax does not come from the fact that she uses magic. It comes, instead, from the distorted image he has created in his mind, where she is extremely dehumanized and demonized – independently of what she was like when she was alive. While he claims to be more powerful than Sycorax because his magic "Sycorax / Could not again undo" (1.2.289 – 290), his actions and the constant

reminder of her seem to suggest otherwise: he feels threatened. She is not alive, she does not exist anymore, and yet Prospero is afraid of his own creation. As stated in Brittney Blystone's "Extremes of Gender and Power: Sycorax's Absence in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*", "Prospero creates her into something powerful enough to incite fear" (Blystone, 2004: 77). While she is not there to harm or scare him, he feels threatened enough to create a monster born out of his own uneasiness and the preconceptions he has about her. However, his arguments are not convincing. It is commonly believed that the difference between magicians and witches, apart from the fact that they reportedly use white magic and black magic respectively, is that a witch's powers come from revenge and greed, therefore they are able to hurt others; whereas magicians can only harm themselves for they do not use magic with a dark purpose and it is used to help other people instead.

Prospero's main argument against Sycorax is that she uses magic with an evil purpose in mind, whereas he is a benevolent wizard. In *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles*, talking about William Shakespeare's late romances –category in which *The Tempest* is included–, Phyllis Rackin explains:

In the romances, as in *Henry VIII*, which shares many of the generic features of romance, women are associated with a benevolent, redemptive providence. In this, as in many other respects, *The Tempest* is an exception. Appropriating the feminine role of nurturing parent, Prospero also appropriates the feminine powers of theatrical illusion and benevolent magic. The woman with supernatural powers in Prospero's world is Sycorax, an evil witch. (Rackin 1990: 194)

It is no secret that generally women were expected to be well-behaved, kind and nurturing, which does not really apply to Sycorax as far as the audience knows. Whether she was evil or not, she was still an unruly woman and a single mother who was powerful enough not to

need a man to survive. Theoretically, Prospero adopts what Rackin calls “the feminine role” when it comes to both parenthood and witchcraft – at least according to his own speech. In a Modern context, if an audience had to choose between Sycorax, a possibly colored woman who had intercourse with the devil and practiced black magic, and Prospero, a good wizard and loving father, the answer would be very clear. However, Prospero is not to be trusted. He may claim to be benevolent, but realistically that is not the case, neither as a wizard nor as a father, necessarily. In fact, he accuses Sycorax of enslaving and torturing Ariel while he is giving him the exact same treatment, as well as treating Caliban as an animal. The version of Sycorax that Prospero built is really not that far from what he is himself. He constantly tries to portray Sycorax as the villain of the story, the woman that should be hated and feared, but the truth is that she is not a villain but Prospero’s foil. In literature, what is understood as a foil is a character that exists in order to contrast or highlight another character's features. In this case, Sycorax exists, in a way, “as the disembodied symbol of the man’s most terrible fears.” (Busia, 1989: 86) Even though Prospero believes Sycorax is the complete opposite of what he is, she is actually created as a reflection of himself (as they are both supernatural beings who, reportedly, use their powers with the same aims), as well as a representation of Prospero's deepest fears and insecurities.

The character of Sycorax as a powerful and independent woman and single mother challenged the established patriarchal thought, both in terms of the situation in the island as well as in England at the time. Therefore, Prospero projects onto Sycorax his worst anxieties and views about women. The thought of a society where the man is neither the most relevant entity nor necessarily essential for women is unconceivable for Prospero,

whose entire system is based on his own patriarchy. He creates an image of Sycorax as an attempt to demonize her, but in doing that, in attributing both a sense of danger and more power to her than anyone on the island would have ever known otherwise, he converts her into the main threat to his own patriarchy. He turns her into a witch, in the most depictive sense of the word, because being a witch meant being "the mirror reversal of all that the patriarchy deemed good in a woman." (Williams, 2015: 4) Thus, Prospero's hatred lies not on the fact that she can use magic, but on her gender. He is angry about women's potential power, which would probably imply a loss of power on his part, at least to a certain degree. In fact, Sycorax is not the only woman who is visibly excluded from the story, as Prospero also criticizes his mother and grandmother, who are not in the play either. As Blystone explains, "*The Tempest* provides enough evidence about the women in the play for us to speculate about them, but not enough for us to make any justified conclusions or arguments." (Blystone, 2012: 73)

In this case, the question of gender leads us directly to parenthood. As mentioned above, Prospero appropriates the role not only of the benevolent wizard but also of the loving and nurturing parent that is usually associated with women, which results in Prospero playing both Miranda's father and mother. Although one could argue that said appropriation clashes with the idea that he is a misogynistic man who hates women and their potential power, that is not exactly the case. As mentioned in "Masculine Authority and the Maternal Body", "even before the play has begun, the maternal body has been defined as dangerous and banished in the form of Sycorax." (Adelman, 1992: 237) He does take on a feminine role, but for the mere reason that the maternal body appears to be a corrupted entity that only he can fix by appropriating it. Back in Shakespearean times,

maternity, pregnancy and childbirth were all part of a great mystery as the information was quite limited. The whole process of conceiving a child was a troubling concept for some, who believed that its “unpredictability, inexplicability, danger and momentousness” (Penuel, 2007: 116) turned it into something both miraculous and dangerous, especially because women were considered to be biologically inferior to men. Consequently, the idea of a woman being able to do what a man could not do and having to rely on the female body for reproduction was alarming to some. Pregnancy gave women a kind of power that men would never have and Prospero is a clear example of how maternity can be scary and threatening for men.

Actually, the idea of motherhood providing women with a certain degree of power is present even in Shakespeare’s earliest works. For instance, in the history play *Henry VI*, Joan la Pucelle (commonly known as Joan of Arc) is accused of witchcraft and sentenced to death. In an attempt to make her killers change their minds, she says, “I am with child, ye bloody homicides: / Murder not then the fruit within my womb,” (5.5.62 – 63). Unfortunately, she still does not manage to avoid death, but the idea of pregnancy being a powerful tool for women is still present. When it comes to Sycorax, as it has been previously established, it is commonly believed that she was banished from Algiers because her powers interfered with the Algerian authorities. However, if her offense was as serious as to be forced into exile –and taking into account the situation of witches or women accused of witchcraft at the time–, the obvious solution would have been death, yet somehow she managed to avoid it. The reason is not entirely clear, as most facts surrounding Sycorax, but Prospero does hint at the reason being her pregnancy: “for one thing she did / They would not take her life. / Is this not true? [...] / This blue-eyed hag was

hither brought with child / And here was left by the sailors.” (1.2.267 – 270) Not only is it mentioned that she was brought to the island with a child, most likely in her womb, but there is also an allusion to her blue eyes, which may not refer to the color of her actual eyes. In the words of Diane Purkiss, “modern editors universally interpret the blue eyes as merely blue eyelids, signs of pregnancy” (Purkiss, 1996: 265) If that is the case, the maternal body provides Sycorax with an escape route to what would have been a tragic ending, something that would not have been possible had she been a man. Nevertheless, it does not mean that pregnancy saves her from any other type of violence or attack because her new-found power through childbirth is exactly the kind of power that Prospero is so resentful about, so he turns the maternal body into a corrupted entity by means of undermining the absent witch and adopting the role of both Miranda’s father and mother himself. In order to solve the problem of motherhood, “*The Tempest* appears to do just what early moderns sometimes did – it kills the troublesome mother figures, leaving only a father.” (Penuel, 2007: 117)

The consequences of subverting the figure of the silent witch and everything she represents –women’s potential power, independence, breaking free from gender restrictions– are very clearly seen in the character of Caliban, who is treated as a subhuman by the self-proclaimed benevolent wizard. If Sycorax is presented as an evil and savage woman, her son is portrayed as a “hag-seed” (1.2.367), a barbaric being conceived by a witch and the devil. Thus, one would think that such a creature would not be able to make a convincing case regarding the legacy that Sycorax left for him in terms of land, but Caliban’s claim to the island is fairly valid and he is able to establish and understand the reasons why, technically, he should have legal kingship to the place that is now ruled by the

wizard. He appears to be very stubborn about the island being his, “by Sycorax my mother, / Which thou takest from me.” (1.2.133) Anyhow, it does not matter how authentic or logical the case he presents is, because it will always be diminished by Prospero’s powerful rhetoric and magic with words. However, by claiming the island as his, Prospero is dismissing the concept of matrilineal succession, consequently diminishing women’s power once again.

It is, therefore, quite clear that Prospero’s main issue with Sycorax is related to gender, rather than witchcraft or race. According to what the audience is told, she was actually a powerful witch, a single mother and, possibly, a colored woman, but it is her absence that makes such a somber representation possible. By leaving her out of the play in a physical sense, Shakespeare allows Prospero to turn her into a gender stereotype and construct his own version of the witch according to his view on women, a version that is supposed to highlight his benevolence in contrast to Sycorax’s sinister portrayal. What appears to be a good strategy for the benevolent wizard, though, turns against him when his own construction becomes a threat to the patriarchy he represents. Hence, Prospero’s conception of Sycorax and his constant attempts to undermine her, her magic and her legacy turn out to be a mere reflection of his worst flaws and fears, all of which revolve around women’s potential power. After all, analyzing a character through other observers will only reveal real information about the characters doing the interpretation, for it sheds light on their own insecurities and weaknesses.

## Conclusion

It has been established that the situation in England during the Modern Ages was not completely favorable for women. Living in a patriarchal society, where males were the ones supposed to be the leaders of businesses and families, women were actually quite powerless. One of the main disadvantages of patriarchal thought was that if females were not being looked after by either their fathers or husbands and they chose to behave in ways that were not considered appropriate for females (that is, if they were fearless, unspoken and possibly more sexually active than it was socially accepted at the time), they were in danger of being accused of witchcraft.

In Postcolonial literature, the term “double bind” often applies to the double alienation that women suffer for being both women and colored. While it is never mentioned explicitly that Sycorax from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* is a colored woman, it can be assumed given that she is banished from North Africa. In addition, she is associated with magic, meaning she is included in yet another minority. In this case, then, Sycorax is subjected to a triple bind: she is colored, a woman and a witch; and she is constantly “othered” by Prospero. Although he does mention her powers as well as her banishment, it is clear that his hatred towards her comes neither from magic nor race. It is a gender issue. Sycorax, by being absent, gives Prospero enough freedom to create the image of the woman that suits him and his needs. Therefore, the version of Sycorax that is presented to the audience is an evil witch, a gender stereotype that embodies all the negative assumptions that Prospero seems to have about women. In fact, in his attempt to undermine women’s potential power—which in this case revolves mainly around motherhood, pregnancy and childbirth—he appropriates the maternal body by means of acting as both father and mother



to his daughter, as well as diminishing Sycorax as a mother by dismissing matrilineal succession and neglecting her legacy.

However, what Prospero chooses to say about Sycorax and the image that he constructs of her will always say more about him than about the absent witch or any other woman in general, for that matter. Through Sycorax, he attempts to portray everything that patriarchal thought considered unacceptable in a woman: he creates a supernatural being that is evil, powerful, independent and revengeful. He demonizes the absent witch enough to incite fear, which in the end turns against him and becomes a threat to his own patriarchy. Sycorax becomes, inevitably, a foil that sheds light on Prospero's greatest flaws and fears, which appear to be losing his power along with the system that his kingship and strength as a wizard is built on. Although initially Sycorax is created to highlight Prospero's benevolence, ultimately she proves to exist as a contradiction to his masculinity and a symbol that challenges patriarchal thought.

# Bibliography

## Primary Sources

Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Edited by Cedric Watts for *The Wordsworth Classics' Shakespeare Series*. England: Wordsworth Editions, 2004.

## Secondary Sources

Adelman, Janet. "Masculine Authority and the Maternal Body" in David Skeele's *Pericles: Critical Essays*. New York: Routledge, 2000. 184 – 191.

Barry, Jonathan. "Introduction: Keith Thomas and the Problem of Witchcraft" in Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester and Gareth Roberts' (Ed.) *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 1 – 48.

Blystone, Brittney. "Extremes of Gender and Power: Sycorax's Absence in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*" *Selected Papers of the Ohio Valley Shakespeare Conference* Vol. V. 2012: 73 – 83, Northern Kentucky University. (Accessed: 01/02/2015) <https://blogs.uakron.edu/ovsc/issues/current-issue-2/extremes-of-gender-and-power-sycoraxs-absence-in-shakespeares-the-tempest/>

Busia, Abena P. A. "Silencing Sycorax: On African Colonial Discourse and the Unvoiced Female." *Cultural Critique*, No. 14, *The Construction of Gender and Modes of Social Division II*. Winter 1989 • 1990: 81 • 104. (Accessed 01/02/2015) <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/1354293?sid=21105282818511&uid=2&uid=4&uid=3737952>

Gay, Penny. "Preface." In Penny Gay's *As She Likes It: Shakespeare's Unruly Women*. London, UK. 1994. 1 – 2.

Nieuwkerk, Jennifer A. "Witches and Whores: Words that Silence Women and Voices that Challenge Patriarchy" Published by the Lehigh University Digital Library (website), Pennsylvania. December 2008. (Accessed 09/06/2015) <http://jsaw.lib.lehigh.edu/viewarticle.php?id=1426&layout=html>

- Oster, Emily. "Witchcraft, Weather and Economic Growth in Renaissance Europe." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 18, No. 1. Published by the University of Chicago. Winter 2004: 215 – 228. (Accessed 01/04/2015) <http://home.uchicago.edu/eoster/withec.pdf>
- Penuel, Suzanne. "Male Mothering and The Tempest" in Kathryn M. Moncrief and Kathryn R. McPherson's *Performing Maternity in Early Modern England*. Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2007. 115 – 132.
- Rackin, Phyllis. "Patriarchal History and Female Subversion" in Phyllis Rackin's *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles*. United States: Cornell University Press, 1990. 146 – 2000.
- Shakespeare, William. *Henry VI, Part One*. Edited by Michael Taylor for *The Oxford Shakespeare Collection*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2003.
- Tóth, Gabriella. "Sycorax on Stage: The Unvoiced Shakespearean Female Other Finally Speaks in Suniti Namjoshi's Poetry" *Gender Studies*, Issue no. 12. Published by The West University of Timisoara, Romania. 2013: 126 – 143.
- Williams, Sarah F. *Damnable Practises: Witches, Dangerous Women, and Music in Seventeenth-Century English Broadside Ballads*. England: Ashgate Publishing, 2015.